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SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN SHI'A LEADER ON RELATIONS WITH GOE, IRAN

Classified By: MINISTER-COUNSELOR FOR ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL AFFAIRS
WILLIAM R. STEWART FOR REASON 1.4 (D).

1. Key Points:

--(C) We met recently with Mohamed al-Darini, leader of the Supreme Council of the Descendants of the Prophet, an Egyptian Shi'a organization. According to al-Darini, there are approximately 60,000 Shi'a in Egypt, not counting Iraqi refugees.

--(C) Al-Darini said Egypt's Shi'a community currently has "no problems" with the GoE, but the Ministry of Islamic Endowments, which licenses mosques, has not licensed any Shi'a mosques in Egypt or recognized his organization.

--(C) Al-Darini was arrested in March 2004 for publicly criticizing Saudi Arabian "Wahabi" influence on Egyptian society, thereby, in the GoE's view, damaging Egyptian-Saudi relations. He said he was treated relatively well until his case was cited in the State Department's 2004 International Religious Freedom Report. He was then accused of being an "American agent," transferred to a harsher prison, and badly mistreated.

--(C) On relations between Egypt's Shi'a community and Iran, al-Darini denied receiving support from or having contact with Iran.

Egypt's Shi'a

2.(SBU) Al-Darini estimated that Shi'a number no more than 60,000, not counting refugees from Iraq. Many live in Red Sea coastal cities and are descendants of immigrants from Iran and Lebanon. Some, including al-Darini, are converts from Sunni Islam. Al-Darini said that there are no GoE licensed Shi'a mosques or recognized Shi'a organizations.

3.(C) According to al-Darini, although he is concerned about growing "Wahabi" influence on Egypt which he believes is fueling intolerance in Egyptian society, Egypt's Shi'a community currently has "no problems" with the GoE. In 2004, however, the GoE arrested a number of Egyptian Shi'a, including al-Darini.

Al-Darini's Arrest

4.(C) Al-Darini attributed his arrest in March 2004 not to his religious beliefs, but to his criticism of Saudi Arabia's Wahabism and its influence on Egyptian society. He said GoE security officials told him directly that he was arrested because his activities "damaged" Egypt's relationship with Saudi Arabia. He said that he was initially treated well by prison authorities until September 2004 when his arrest was

reported in the State Department's annual religious freedom report. After the release of the report, al-Darini said GoE security services - citing the report - accused him of being an "American agent," transferred him to a prison with much harsher conditions, placed him in solitary confinement, and "badly mistreated" him (NFI). The GoE released al-Darini in May 2005. Al-Darini said the GoE again detained him in 2007 for several months for criticizing Egypt's human rights record.

No Iranian Support for Egypt's Shi'a

5.(C) Al-Darini said his organization, and Egyptian Shi'a generally, receive no support from Iran. He cautioned against equating Iran with Shi'a Islam and said "Iran looks after its national interests first, not Shi'a interests." In fact, he suggested that Iran would be more likely to have contacts with, and even support, Egypt's Moslem Brotherhood than Egypt's Shi'a community.

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